

# Special Needs

**A Short Story**

**by**

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**With Special Thanks to**

**Mahala Church**

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What does it mean to be handicapped?

Is it the person who is blind and can't see, or is it the person who is blind to another person's unique potential because he won't look past outward appearances? Is it the person who is deaf and can't hear, or is it the person who is so convinced of the truth of his own opinions he refuses to listen to other viewpoints? Is it the person who is paralyzed and confined to a wheelchair, or is it the person who is paralyzed by failure and disappointment, lacking the courage to believe in faith, hope, and love?

One cold, bitter Christmas Eve morning I woke up to the realization that I truly hated everyone. It was 1989, and for almost a decade, I had lived in a deplorable state. Dressed in nothing but tattered rags, I spent my nights sleeping on stiff cardboard and old newspapers in sludge-filled alleyways. Every morning I woke up to an aching back and the stink of alcohol and vomit on my breath.

That Christmas Eve morning, I staggered down the alleyway where I'd spent the night. My bare hand slid along a cold, icy wall helping to stabilize my equilibrium. I wiped the crusty sleep out of my eyes and emerged from the alley, blinking a few times to adjust to the bright, white glare coming off the snow. I glanced around and realized I was on the sidewalk of one of the more popular shopping districts of downtown.

It was still quite early. The department store in front of me and the pet shop to my right were both closed. The diner to my left was closed, but from the smells hanging in the cold air, I knew someone was already cooking. The streets were fairly empty, but since it was Christmas Eve, I knew there would soon be plenty of frenetic pedestrians scurrying around in a mad dash to

find that last-minute perfect gift. For now, there was only the quiet hum of a sleeping city just beginning to wake up.

A few bums milled about, scattered here and there along the sidewalk, probably hoping to encounter some cheerful soul who was feeling the spirit of Christmas and willing to part with a few bucks. One of them looked over at me, waved, and started towards me. Unfortunately for him, I was in no mood for congenial conversation and quickly shifted my gaze upward to the giant snow-capped skyscrapers that surrounded me. And, thus, I began my daily meditation on the injustices that had been brought upon me in this life.

During my years on the street, I never bothered anybody with my life story. There was no need to. No one would have ever believed I had once been part of the professional well-dressed elite who peered down at the world from the highest floors of those skyscrapers. Twenty years of working my way up the corporate ladder in the savings-and-loan industry had all been flushed down the toilet in an instant. Well, to be fair, ten of those years were filled with substance abuse, which probably led to my downfall. But in that one instant when the police discovered I possessed some pills that were, shall we say, non-prescription, my life was over.

The police let me off easy because I helped them put away my dealer, but still, I lost everything—job, family, friends, future, self-respect—all gone. And for those losses I hated everyone. I was convinced that everybody else and their selfish demands were at fault for driving me to seek refuge in narcotics. My overbearing boss had believed that seventy-hour workweeks should be the norm for everyone but himself. My wife and children had always expected expensive gifts on special occasions. Friends and acquaintances had begged for my attendance at all their silly social functions only to thank me by whispering petty gossip about

me behind my back. My mistress had demanded too much commitment from me when she knew that I had obligations. My pastor had made me feel guilty for everything.

A sudden icy breeze and a rustling noise at my feet pulled me from my meditation. I peered down at a crumpled newspaper. It was soiled and a bit soggy in places but part of the huge headline was still legible. I smiled as I read it: KEATING FIVE. The savings-and-loan industry was faltering, and a lot of people were sucking wind right now. For a moment, I closed my eyes and reveled in the glorious thought of some business big shot being brought down to my level.

My pleasant thoughts were interrupted when a tinny version of “Silver Bells” began playing somewhere off in the distance. Oddly, I sensed a soft warm glow washing over me. I opened my eyes and looked up at the sky, expecting to see the sun attempting to peak out from the dreary gray shroud above me. But it was still overcast. Startled by the sound of a slight shuffle and a timid cough, I shook off my confusion and looked for the source of the noise. I fully expected it to be one of my neighbors from the alley, looking for someone to listen to his sad life story.

Much to my surprise the noise had come from a young girl, no more than ten years old. Dressed in a red hooded overcoat that nearly swallowed her whole, she smiled up at me. Fluffy white fringe around the hood and cuffs of her dark red coat shone in the sunlight and lit up her beaming young freckled face. Her face was one that would light up a dark room and draw the attention of a busy crowd wherever it went.

The less affable part of me was sickened by the sweet perfection of her beauty, yet another part of me was captivated. I couldn't help staring at the girl's face in wonder. In fact, I was so entranced several minutes passed before I noticed that the beautiful red coat partially

covered an ugly metal contraption that extended down her legs to a pair of clunky brown shoes on her feet. She began to wobble a bit, but the braces on her legs kept her stabilized.

I felt my open mouth opening wider as I stared in shock at the stark contrast between the beautiful upper half of this young girl and the grotesque lower half. Even more unsettling was the cruelty it implied. How could an all-powerful creator make something so astonishingly beautiful and let it be plagued with such horrible infirmity?

I wanted to ask what had happened to her, but, fortunately, I was too speechless to embarrass myself. Suddenly sensing that I had stared longer than any decent human being should stare, my gaze drifted back to her face. I half-expected her to be in tears after being ogled by some dirty old man, but she just stood there.

At first I thought maybe she was frozen in fear of my wretched appearance—grimy unshaven face, greasy hair, oily dirty torn clothes. But I didn't sense fear. I sensed calm. I sensed peace. I sensed warmth. She was still smiling at me.

Unfortunately for her, my natural disposition had returned. I stiffened, screwed up my face in a scowl, and glared at her.

“Well?” I demanded. “Whaddya want?”

I expected my growling bark to send her running as fast as her little crippled legs could take her. But instead, she spoke up in a tiny little voice and said something that caught me totally off guard.

“I'm going to pray for you tonight.”

With that, she reached out with one of her green-mitten-covered hands, placed a shiny coin in my grimy bare hand, turned, and hobbled off. I watched her for several moments, staring in amazement, before finally glancing down at the coin she had deposited into my hand. It was

one of those old Kennedy half dollars with JFK's likeness emblazoned on the head's side. The year on the coin read 1964. It looked brand new.

"'In God We Trust'," I read aloud. "Humph!"

Then it hit me. What was a small kid doing wandering alone through a nearly deserted area of downtown early in the morning? And why was she handing out fifty-cent pieces to total strangers? What were her parents thinking, letting a girl like that wander around alone? For that matter, where were the parents? For that matter, why did I care?

Shaking the thoughts aside, I stared at the little brat as she plodded along the snow-covered sidewalk and disappeared around a corner. The parents were probably at the nearby toy store waiting for the doors to open. They were probably waiting in a huge line with a hundred other frantic shoppers, all of them primed to rush in and be the first to buy their precious darlings anything and everything they wanted before it was all snatched up.

I shook my head and laughed. I had once been one of those simple-minded fools that fell for all the sappy sentimental advertising put out by retail merchants during the Christmas season. How could anybody afford to waste so much time and money for one day of the year? How could anybody find joy in a season plagued with so much greed and selfishness, a season brought on by an absurd craving to dote on a bunch of good-for-nothing brats?

I began a mental tirade on all the things that people cherish about Christmas. I mocked Charles Dickens. I ridiculed Frank Capra. I even sneered at Rod Serling for writing that silly Twilight Zone episode where Art Carney plays street-bum-turned-Santa-Claus-for-a-day. I scorned all the famed storywriters who attribute angelic qualities to little brats, especially little handicapped brats, as if there is something magical and wonderful about them.

"God bless us, everyone!" I muttered. "Humph! Yeah, right!"

I laughed out loud at the belief in a jolly old fat man that possessed the ability to deliver toys to all the good boys and girls of the world in a single night. I laughed at the equally ridiculous belief that a benevolent spirit descended from the heavens and died on a cross for people who spit on him and curse his name. I cursed myself for having once believed in all the fairy tales. I cursed life itself.

I ranted and raved until my anger reached a boiling point. The angrier I got, the tighter I gripped the half dollar. Suddenly, I felt a vibration in my hand. I stared in amazement as a blue aura began to glow around it. A high-pitched ringing started in my ears, muffling the sounds of the awakening city. I reached out for a nearby wall as a dizzying sensation overcame me, and the ground beneath me seemed to disappear. I felt myself falling....

The aroma of spiced apple cider tickled my nostrils.

“Would you like some more apple cider, dear?”

A soft female voice penetrated through the ringing in my ears, and the sensation of falling subsided. Eventually, I felt myself nestled in the plush cushions of an old, familiar comfy chair. The high-pitched ringing in my ears was replaced by the soothing strains of Nat King Cole's *Hark the Herald Angels Sing* and the soft sounds of crackling fire. The bitter cold air of the alley had disappeared, and I was now toasty warm.

My eyes slowly worked their way into focus, and the first thing I saw were my argyle-socked feet propped up on an ottoman before me. I was no longer dressed in tatters but now wore business casual attire as if I had just attended a social gathering. How strange. Even stranger, my clothes appeared to be several eons out of style.

I looked up to examine the dimly lit room before me. Off to one side was the fireplace

that I had heard crackling earlier. There were two Christmas stockings hanging from the mantle. Off to another side of the room, I heard the sound of kids making sputtering airplane noises with their mouths. I glanced over and saw two young boys that I instantly recognized sitting next to a Christmas tree. One of them was eight years of age and the other six. They were both playing with toy airplanes, whizzing them through the air in a dogfight. They were my sons! But they were much younger than when I had last seen them.

The melodic female voice continued. “Did you notice those young girls at the Fosters’ party this evening with those short short skirts? I mean short skirts in winter! And their boyfriends with all that shaggy hair! Ugh! Somebody get them a pair of scissors!”

“Hm?” I said, absently, still trying to regain my senses.

I heard the clinking sound of a cup and saucer being set down on the table next to me. My attention shifted from the young boys to the slim hand that had set the cup down, and then further up to the face of a beautiful young woman. Her gorgeous sandy blonde hair was done up in a beehive style, reminiscent of Audrey Hepburn in *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*. She was dressed in a white turtleneck, light brown form-fitting pants, and stocking feet. It was my wife, albeit a much younger version than I last remembered.

Suddenly, it hit me. I was home! Only, this was not the opulent dream home in New York where my family had lived for years. This was the home of a long forgotten memory. This was my young family’s first home in a little town called Springfield, the town where my wife and I were born, where we grew up, and where we fell in love. But how could this be?

I jerked the newspaper up from my lap and scanned the headlines:

LBJ CONSIDERS ESCALATION OF MILITARY INCURSION IN VIETNAM

ANTI-INTEGRATION PROTESTS TURN VIOLENT



## NASA PREPARES FOR NEXT PHASE OF APOLLO PROGRAM

The banner at the top of the front page read *SPRINGFIELD GAZETTE*, the date December 24, 1964. It was Christmas Eve 1964. I was thirty-four again. My wife was thirty-two. And today was our tenth wedding anniversary. I glanced up at my wife and noticed something amiss.

“Hey!” I exclaimed. “Where’s the diamond brooch I bought you for our wedding anniversary?”

My wife screwed her face up in a puzzled look as she reached for my overcoat lying on the couch.

“Don’t you remember, dear? We decided to take it back,” she said, coolly.

“What?” I exclaimed.

“It was way over our budget,” she said, as she hung my coat up in the closet. “And you know I would feel silly wearing such an extravagant thing in public. But it was awfully sweet of you to buy it for me.”

Yes, it was all coming back to me. We did return it. It had cost a fortune! But later I would change my mind and go back to get it again the next day...or would I? This was confusing. I was remembering memories that hadn’t happened yet.

My wife sat down on the armrest beside me and softly tousled my hair. The feeling of being close to her was intoxicating. She put her arm around me and hugged me softly.

“Besides,” she continued, “we’ve already spent a bundle on the kids. Just being here in good health with you and the kids is enough of a gift for me.”

“Hmmm, well, if you say so,” I said, not convinced.

She smiled, patted me on the shoulder, and then sauntered off toward the adjacent

kitchen. I couldn't help admiring the view as she walked away.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"I have to get started on those pies for the Christmas dinner at your mother's house tomorrow," she said. "You do remember that, don't you?"

"Oh, yeah, sure," I said, blankly.

She stopped in the kitchen doorway, turned, and scrutinized me closely.

"Are you okay, dear?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'm fine," I lied, burying my head in the newspaper and staring intently at it to disguise my confusion. Out of the corner of my eye, I could tell she was still looking at me strangely, but then she just shrugged her shoulders, turned and walked into the kitchen.

While I attempted to sort out the swirling thoughts in my mind, I kept my eyes locked on the newspaper but not really focused on the words. A sudden clattering of pots and pans startled me, rattling my nerves. In an attempt to calm myself down, I began reading the first article I came upon, a story about some rock 'n roll band called The Beatles, a group of four mop-topped transplants from Britain that were apparently becoming a major sensation in the US.

There was a short quiet pause in the kitchen. Then I heard some drawers open and close and then the clinking of utensils. This was followed by another short pause, and then suddenly my wife's sing-song voice called out.

"So, are you still planning to take that job at the bank in Cleveland?"

I stopped reading and puzzled over this for a minute. She was trying to sound nonchalant, but I detected a certain something in her voice suggesting that she had a certain something on her mind that she wanted to discuss. I closed the newspaper, a bit flustered.

"Well, uh—sure," I stammered. "You know I am. Why? Is there a problem?"

I heard a few of the cabinet doors open and close before her voice rang out from the kitchen again. “Well,” she continued, carefully, “I know it’s a big opportunity for you, but—“

“Of course it’s a big opportunity!” I exclaimed. “It’s not just a ‘job at the bank in Cleveland’! It’s a job as district manager at the regional office in Cleveland. I’ll be making almost twice as much as I’m making now!” I proclaimed, proudly.

“But isn’t the cost of living much higher in Cleveland? And what about all that crime and pollution in the city?” She replied, peeking around the corner.

“It’s the opportunity of a lifetime! Just think, sweetheart. We’ll be able to afford all kinds of things that we couldn’t before!”

“Well—“

“We’ll have a brand new house with brand new appliances— refrigerator, dishwasher, washing machine, tumble dryer.”

“We already have all those things—“

“Even air conditioning,” I added.

“Will we need air conditioning in Cleveland?”

“We’ll be able to buy a new car and get rid of that old Studebaker.”

“We’ve made a few nice memories in that old Studebaker.”

“Perhaps a swimming pool, a new TV with a remote control—“

“I miss the radio shows. I wish they would bring those back.”

“You can buy some new furniture. Heaven knows that old ratty couch needs to be thrown out and replaced.”

“I like our ‘old ratty couch’!”

“And maybe we can afford to send our kids to a good prep school.”

“What’s wrong with the school here in Springfield? Both our boys have great teachers, and they’ve made some good friends at that school.”

At the mention of the word “friends”, my youngest brought his toy airplane to a stop in mid-air and chimed in. “Daddy, if we move to Cleveland, can we take Tommy with us?” he asked, referring to his best friend at school.

“No, I don’t think Tommy’s parents would approve of that,” I said with a chuckle. “But you’ll make lots of new friends in Cleveland.”

I turned back to my wife, who had now come over to the chair and was squatting down beside me so that we were eye level.

“Besides, just think, honey,” I continued softly, struggling to keep my train of thought as I stared into those sparkling green eyes. “If I do well in Cleveland, and I play my cards right, in five years time, I could end up with the big boys at the home office in New York! New York! We’ll be able to go out on the town every night. And I’ll be able to buy you all the things you ever wanted—diamond bracelets, mink coats, expensive perfume-”

“I don’t recall saying that I wanted any of those things.”

I looked at my wife, flummoxed.

“Honey, you’re not listening!” I exclaimed.

My wife sighed, a little exasperated. “Look, sweetheart,” she said, patiently. “All I’m saying is that we have a good life here in Springfield. It may not be much in terms of houses and cars and furniture, but I believe we have more than all that. Springfield is a nice town. Practically, everyone here knows each other. We have good friends here. The Fosters. The Reimers. The Worthams. We live so close to all our relatives, and our kids do go to a good school. If we make a big move now, sure, it may open the door for more opportunities, but what

sort of opportunities? Money won't solve every problem that we encounter along the way. I'm sure that even wealthy people have their tough times now and then." She paused for a moment, waiting for my response.

I felt a certain undeniable weight press down upon me. I knew my response would somehow determine the rest of my life. My eyes drifted out of focus again as my mind swirled with thoughts about opportunities and possibilities, rewards and consequences. Why was I so eager to leave Springfield? What was waiting for me out there?

"I know how you feel, honey," I replied slowly. "It's just, I love you all very much, and I want you and the kids to have everything that you deserve."

My wife let out another sigh, this time more exhausted than exasperated.

"I'm sorry, dear," she said, raising up and sitting on the armrest beside me again. "I'm not trying to tell you what to do. Whatever you decide, I'm sure you'll do the right thing for our family. I'm just asking you to give it a little more consideration before you make a final decision, okay?"

And with that she smiled down at me, tousled my hair again, bent over and gave me a soft kiss on the lips, then sauntered back toward the kitchen. I closed my eyes for a second, relishing the warmth of that gentle kiss and the full meaning behind it. It seemed an eternity since I had last kissed those soft lips, yet wasn't it just yesterday?

"Oh! I'm sorry, dear," my wife said whirling around in the kitchen doorway. "I forgot you said you had a headache earlier."

I opened my eyes. My lovely wife stared back at me, her face possessing the youth of a young bride, but now assuming the demeanor of watchful mother, always on the alert for signs of trouble that could disturb her beloved household. For a moment, I basked in the comfort of that

thought. For some reason, it seemed as if it had been a very long time since I had felt such warmth and concern from another person's gaze.

I had to admit our little family had a pretty good thing going. We weren't really in desperate need of anything. Sure, there were tough times now and then, and there were times when we wished we could afford certain things. But would more material possessions really make us happier?

We had a roof over our heads. Yes, it was a ten-year-old, one-story, ranch-style house, but it wasn't in that bad of shape. We had plenty to wear. Yes, our youngest usually wore hand-me-downs from his older brother, and my wife and I often wore last year's fashion, but so what? We had plenty to eat. No, we didn't have a steak dinner every night, but it was usually a well-balanced home-cooked meal. Most of all, we had each other. What more could we possibly need?

"Sweetie, would you like me to bring you a couple of pills to help ease the pain?"

"What?" I said, looking back at my wife.

"Do you want some pills for your headache?"

This was interesting. I really had no headache to speak of at the moment, but, suddenly, the idea of a sleeping pill and maybe an aspirin or two was very enticing. After all, department store bills from our recent Christmas shopping spree would no doubt be arriving after the holidays were over. I squirmed in my chair with a restless, uneasy feeling just thinking about it.

Still, there was something else, something about the love and concern I witnessed in my wife's eyes, something about the joy on my children's faces as they pumped themselves up for the arrival of old man Christmas, something about the warmth in my heart at this very moment that compelled me to say, "No."

I turned to my wife who looked a little taken aback. I smiled and gave her a confident wink. “No,” I said again, this time softer but with more finality. “No pills, thanks. I think everything is going to be all right now.”

“Well, good,” she said. “Now if you wouldn’t mind, I think it’s time to set out some milk and cookies for Santa and put these little ones to bed.”

I’ve decided that all of us have handicaps of one sort or another. We all have special needs. Sometimes, it takes us a while to discover how to work through our handicaps and figure out what truly satisfies those special needs. Fortunately, most of us have the support of true friends and close relatives to help us work through our disabilities and show us what really matters.

For those of you who are down on your luck and feel you don’t have anyone to turn to, keep your eyes open. Perhaps someday you’ll be blessed with a visit by an angel. Your angel may not come in white robes and golden wings, as you might expect. It may simply be a ten-year-old girl in a red overcoat with her own special needs, just like you and me.

THE END

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